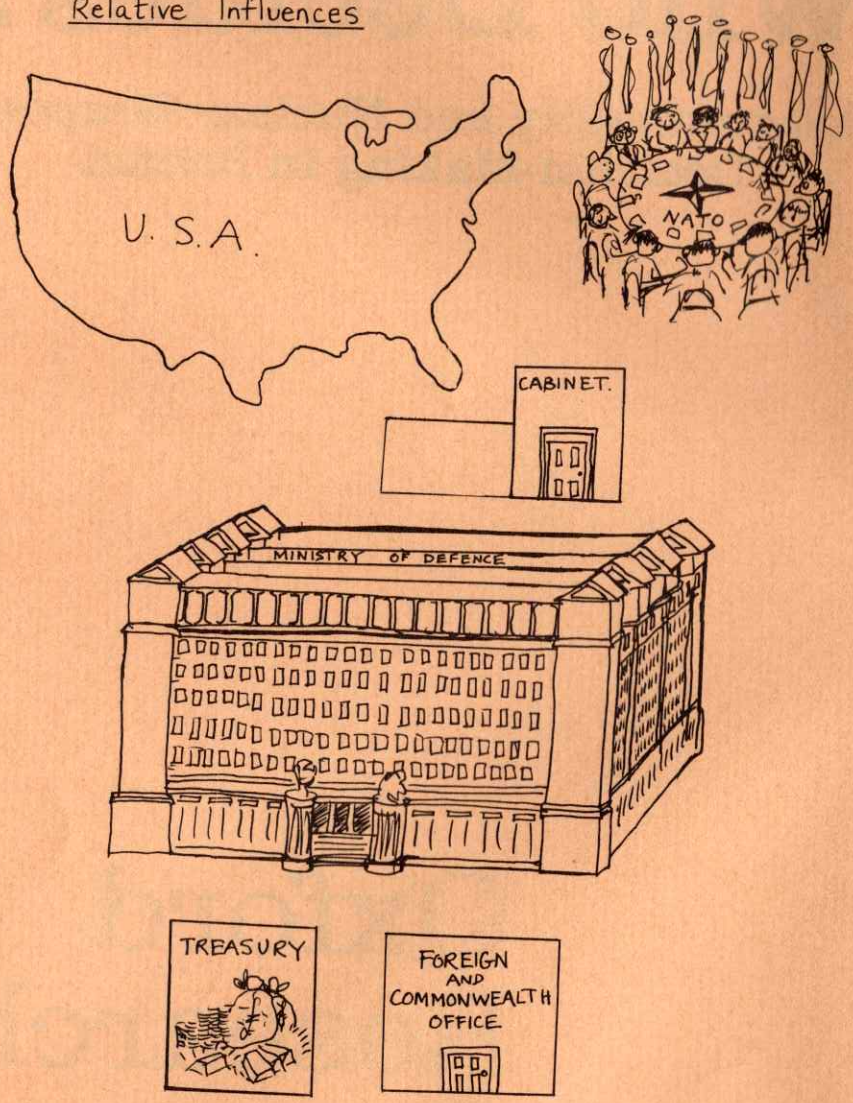
Who Decides?

Accountability and Nuclear Weapons Decision-Making in Britain

Oxford Research Group



Decision-making on Nuclear Weapons in Britain

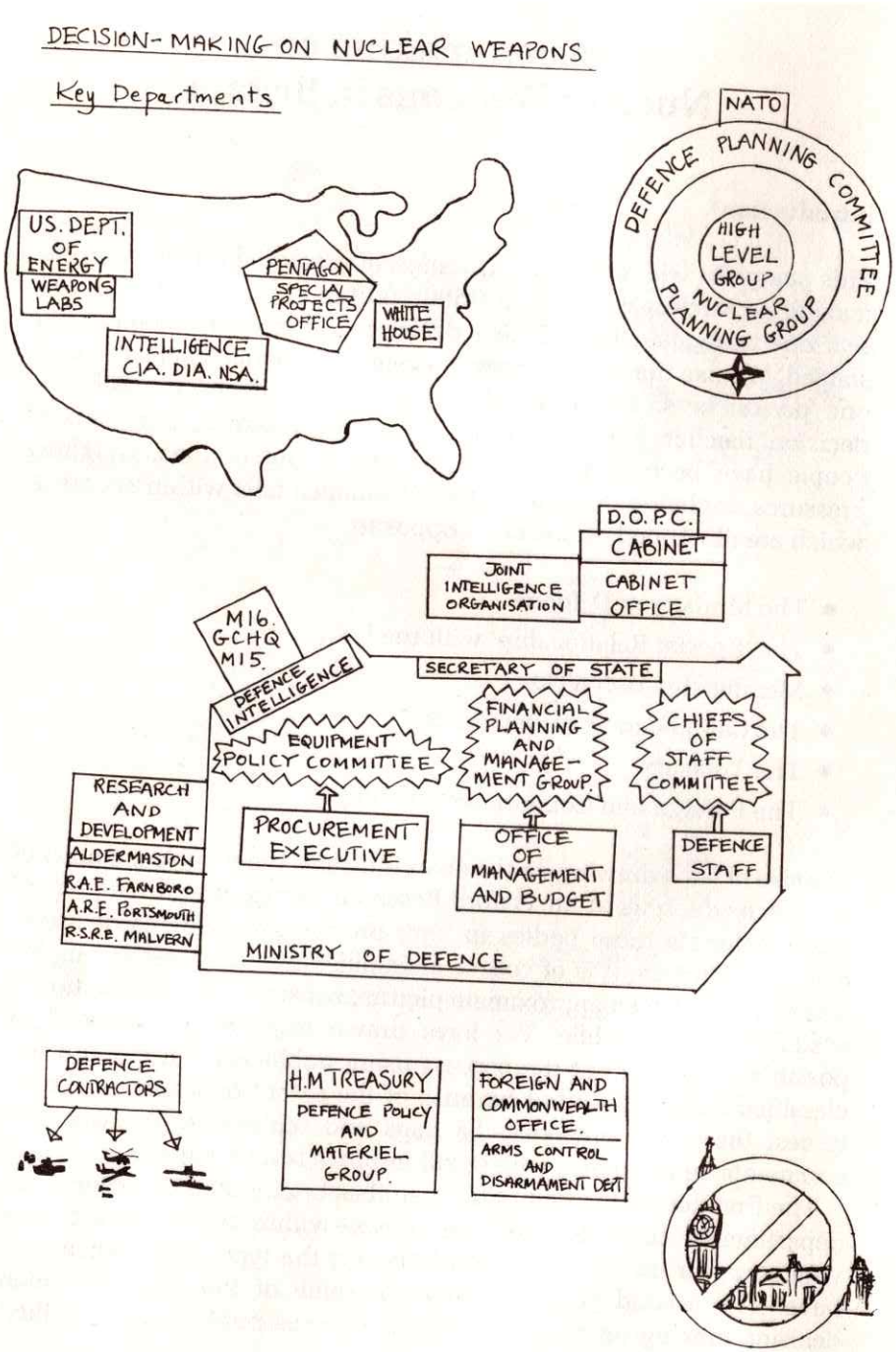
Introduction

This pamphlet will discuss the question of accountability in decision-making on nuclear weapons in Britain. But in order to do that, it first sets out to explain how British decisions on nuclear weapons are shaped. We use the word 'shaped' because it is perfectly clear that no one person or small group of people 'makes' decisions. Before a decision reaches the final point of Cabinet approval, hundreds of people have been at work on it, screening out options, weighing pressures, lobbying, 'clearing'. Their influence falls within six areas, which are illustrated on the chart opposite:

- The Ministry of Defence
- The 'Special Relationship' with the USA
- Membership of NATO
- The Cabinet and Cabinet Office
- The Treasury
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The size of each drawing on the chart indicates the relative amounts of influence which we at the Oxford Research Group, after three years of study, estimate these bodies to have on nuclear weapons decision-making in Britain. It is of course a simplification of a vastly complex process. It is also an approximate picture, because little information is available to the public. We have drawn together as balanced as possible an account of the process using published sources and un-classified information; but because of the extent of secrecy on these issues, there will obviously be gaps and omissions. We welcome comments and criticism which will improve future editions.

The first part of the pamphlet describes briefly the key sectors—the departments, councils and committees—within the various bodies which appear on the chart, and indicates the type of influence they have. The second part will illustrate some of the ways in which decision-making on nuclear weapons escapes public accountability.



We have a system of accountability for major decisions of national importance in this country, but when it comes to nuclear weapons decisions, in key respects it doesn't work. The chart is a kind of guide through the text, and it will keep appearing in different guises—to show the key interior parts of the various bodies, and to illustrate the problems of accountability.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD)

From its headquarters in Whitehall, the MoD co-ordinates and controls the most important internal influences on weapons policy in Britain: intelligence, research and development, science advice, military strategy, weapons procurement (procurement means the ordering and production of weapons systems), and budget.

The intelligence community plays a key role in nuclear weapons decisions, especially at the very early stages. The combined sources of defence intelligence put forward a 'threat assessment' to senior military and planning staff, indicating their estimate of current and future dangers, new foreign weapons development, tests, allocation of budget to new concepts, and so on. Data is gathered primarily by the Defence Intelligence Service within the MoD, but with input from the Secret Intelligence Service (MI 6), the Security Service (MI 5), and the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham. The data is interpreted and evaluated by four committees, the most important of which are the Joint Intelligence Committee, housed in the Cabinet Office, and the Permanent Secretaries Committee on Intelligence Services. This 'threat assessment' forms the basis for future weapons requirements.

Research and development (R & D) Most modern nuclear weapons comprise an explosive warhead and a 'delivery system'—the missile or other device which guides it to its destination, and the submarine, aircraft or helicopter from which it is fired. For our major systems, Britain buys its missiles from the USA. The British R & D community are largely concerned with warheads for the missiles, airdrop and depth bombs, and all the component parts of the various delivery systems. The main R & D establishments which concern us are:

The Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston
The Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough
The Admiralty Research Establishment at Portsmouth
The Royal Signals and Radar Establishment at Malvern

Scientists and designers at all these establishments, which fall under the control of the MoD, formulate the technological possibilities for new weapons (or refinements of existing ones) and lobby for them in Whitehall. Lord Zuckerman, himself Chief Scientific Adviser to the MoD and then to the government from 1960 to 1971, says that 'it is the man in the laboratory, . . . not the commander in the field, who starts the process of formulating the so-called military need'. New weapons proposals are in due course considered by the Equipment Policy Committee. This is chaired by the Chief Scientific Adviser at the MoD who channels advice from the three services to the Secretary of State. One of his four assistants is responsible for specifically advising ministers on the implications of nuclear defence policy.

Military strategy in Britain has traditionally evolved through a number of separate channels and committees, but will now be concentrated within the Strategy and Policy Area of the new unified Defence Staff within the MoD. This department brings together strategy recommendations from military and civilian sources in liaison with the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Procurement of weapons is the responsibility of the Procurement Executive, whose Chief reports directly to the top MoD civil servant, the Permanent Under-Secretary. He has under him Systems Controllers who deal with ordering and purchase of equipment for each of the three services. These departments negotiate with industry, with the defence contractors who actually produce (and often also design) new weapons systems, excluding nuclear warheads which are manufactured in the Royal Ordnance Factories at Cardiff and Burghfield. Some defence contractors are major corporations, like British Shipbuilders and British Aerospace; the others are public companies, of whom the most significant in terms of nuclear capable systems are: Hunting Engineering, General Electric Company (including Marconi), Lucas Aerospace, Ferranti, Plessey, Racal Electronics, Rolls Royce,

Rolls Royce and Associates, and Westland Aircraft. All weapons programmes with estimated R & D costs of more than £25 million or production costs of more than £50 million must be approved by the Equipment Policy Committee.

Expenditure has always been a key element in deciding what kind of weapons Britain should have; it is now becoming crucial. A new department, the Office of Management and Budget, has been set up within the MoD to deal with long-term financial planning, resource allocation and control of expenditure. There is a clear relationship between this new office and the key MoD committee—the Financial Planning and Management Group. The brief of this committee is to match the defence programme to the available resources, and in financial terms this is where each service will finally accept its slice of the defence cake. The committee brings together the eight most powerful staff in the MoD and is chaired by its top civil servant, the First Permanent Under-Secretary.

The 'Special Relationship' with the US

Ironically, it was the US refusal to continue atomic co-operation with Britain after the end of World War II which prompted the Attlee government to take the decision to build Britain's own first bomb in 1947.

Today, things are very different. Britain has what is known as the 'Special Relationship' with the US—a remarkable web of political and strategic links in which nuclear affairs have been a key strand. Never before in history have two nations maintained such close and intimate ties in such sensitive areas as intelligence gathering and security policy. From the British point of view, a British nuclear capability was one way of ensuring that British interests received adequate consideration in Washington and in NATO discussions. At the same time, the US has profoundly influenced British nuclear policy through the transfer of data and components of nuclear weapons systems.

Weapons supply and collaboration The Bilateral Agreement for Co-operation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes was signed in 1958. Since that time all British warheads have been tested in the US; the agreement, and a further one the following year,

enabled Britain to buy from the US component parts of nuclear weapons systems, to receive information on the design and production of nuclear warheads and to exchange British plutonium for US enriched uranium.

In 1960 National Atomic Co-ordinating Offices were set up in Washington and London, the British one in Washington forming part of the defence staff in the Embassy. The 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement was to set the seal on British nuclear policy for decades—a policy whereby our most important and expensive nuclear weapons have depended upon US-designed and made missiles.

Complex liaison was necessary between the Special Projects Office (SPO) in the Pentagon (which managed Polaris), and the specially-formed Polaris Executive in the MoD. The organisational arrangements between SPO and the Polaris Executive were so effective that the Polaris system was delivered on time and with no cost overruns.

The next important nuclear weapons development in this context was the British designed improvement to the Polaris system—the Chevaline project. Chevaline was a new 'front end' for Polaris missiles, designed to defeat anti-ballistic missiles which the Soviets were thought to be building. As this differed significantly from the US MIRV systems, it has been argued that Aldermaston was developing a vehicle which the US might find attractive. The move seems to have been designed to inject a degree of reciprocity into the Anglo-US relationship, and remove fears that the eight-year (1966–74) suspension of British nuclear testing would lead to a decline in the Joint Working Groups—the lynch pins of the relationship set up in the early 1960s. The procedures used to design the Chevaline warheads seem to have been the established ones, starting from an indigenous design and modifying it in the light of comments and advice from the US weapons laboratories, Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos; implying extensive interchanges with the US Department of Energy as well as the Pentagon (although the entire project was kept secret from the British people and the British Parliament). However the Chevaline project overran both in time and cost, in marked contrast to the Polaris purchase. This strongly influenced the next major British decision; to purchase Trident missiles from the US.

Carter's willingness to sell Trident to Britain may have been a *quid pro quo* for Britain's willingness, agreed by Callaghan with Carter at the Guadeloupe Summit in 1979, to take cruise missiles as part of the Euro-missile decision. The decision in favour of buying Trident from

the US was eventually taken by the Conservative government returned in May 1979, which later agreed to buy the more advanced Trident II in order to maintain commonality with the US. Britain agreed to man US Rapier air defence systems round US airforce bases in Britain throughout the life-time of the Trident programme and to maintain its naval deployments in the Indian ocean, in exchange for contributing only £116 million to the R & D cost of Trident II (estimated at £9 billion).

Joint targeting The US Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) is prepared by the Joint Strategic Planning Target Staff at Omaha in Nebraska—headquarters of American Strategic Air Command. A small British team works there, as part of a NATO team, and British nuclear forces receive their data on the British share of strike targets, identified according to RAF pilots as allied list numbers on a numeric targeting list. There is no input into this war-planning from politically elected or politically accountable people in Britain.

Intelligence links The intelligence relationship between the US and Britain has been close since 1947 when a secret treaty, known as UKUSA, linked GCHQ at Cheltenham with the embryonic National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland. The two agencies have an extraordinary joint capacity to intercept and decode signals worldwide, including military and diplomatic messages by radio, telex, teletype and microwave; all transatlantic phonecalls and satellite communications must be considered open to monitoring. Their computer systems can analyse four million characters a second.

GCHQ is formally part of the Foreign Office, but in effect is responsible to the Joint Intelligence Committee in the Cabinet Office, which began supplying the US with intelligence estimates as early as 1943.

Membership of NATO

NATO is an alliance of sixteen sovereign nations, based on the principle of collective security: '. . . an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an armed attack on them all'.

NATO is in theory an inter-governmental, not supranational, organisation: it has no compulsory binding power over its member govern-

ments. The defence policies of NATO nations are national responsibilities: the function of NATO is to provide an organisational framework for co-ordination of policies.

Understanding the influence of NATO on British nuclear policy is like peeling off the layers of an onion. On the (civilian) outside, NATO has a diplomatic/political organisation, centred round the North Atlantic Council, to which each nation sends an ambassador or permanent representative on a full-time basis, and a Minister of Foreign Affairs to ministerial meetings twice yearly. In terms of seniority, the NATO Defence Planning Committee has equal status and authority to the North Atlantic council and convenes twice yearly at the level of national Ministers of Defence.

NATO nuclear policy formulation Until the mid-1960s nuclear thinking, nuclear planning and nuclear decisions in NATO were an exclusively American affair, and this led to a European mood of alienation and periodic mistrust. The Americans too were unhappy about the situation, wanting to familiarise European politicians with the challenges of modern strategic planning. Therefore out of the NATO Defence Planning Committee, at the instigation of McNamara and UK Defence Minister Healey, grew the Nuclear Defence Affairs Committee in 1966 and its prestigious sub-group in nuclear planning, the Nuclear Planning Group. Today it is this Group, which meets at the level of Defence Ministers twice a year, which discusses central issues of NATO nuclear affairs. The centre of the onion is nearer now.

In 1977 the Nuclear Planning Group took the unusual step of setting up a new sub-committee of senior officials from national defence ministries to prescribe nuclear policy requirements for the future. This Group has met regularly since that time and is called the High-Level Group: it is chaired by the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, its activities are unpublicised and no communiqués of its meetings have ever appeared. The UK representative is the Second Permanent Under Secretary at the MoD in charge of the new Office of Management and Budget.

The High-Level Group is not supposed to be a *decision-making* body, but an analysis of the progress of the 1979 Euro-missile decision shows a sequence of events which demonstrate an extremely strong *policy directing* influence. Briefly, the High-Level Group was set up in 1977

at the urging of the US to examine improvements to NATO's theatre nuclear forces, and formulate specific recommendations. It began meeting in November 1977, chaired by a senior Pentagon official David McGiffert. Although it was attended by defence ministry personnel from ten NATO-Europe capitals, none of them had the resources or the knowledge to match the US impact in the Group. McGiffert was reportedly taken aback at the ease with which the recommendations made by his staff were being accepted by other members of the Group. By February 1978 the High-Level Group had concluded that new US missiles were required for Europe, but further input from a special US inter-departmental study was required before President Carter was ready to seek the support of major European leaders for the decision. In January 1979 he convened the 'Guadeloupe Summit', meeting with Callaghan, Schmidt and Giscard d'Estaing. From then on US diplomacy intensified behind the evolving decision to 'engineer' total political unity in NATO-Europe prior to the announcement of the decision itself. In Summer 1979 the High-Level Group worked out final details of the deployment programme, and in September 1979 prepared its final report. At the end of November the permanent representatives at NATO headquarters in Brussels approved the decision, and three weeks later it was endorsed by NATO's defence and foreign ministers. *The decision was not debated in the British Parliament until 1982.*

The integrated military structure In 1984 Britain devoted ninety five per cent of its total defence resources to NATO commitments. Britain belongs to NATO's integrated military structure, and most British armed forces are 'earmarked' for assignment to the 'operational command and control' of the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) and the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) in circumstances of crisis or war.

In the nuclear weapons realm the British Navy, Army and Air Force all deploy nuclear forces committed to the NATO Alliance. Britain's fleet of four Polaris submarines is currently the core of Britain's 'independent nuclear deterrent'. They are deemed to be a 'contribution' to NATO's nuclear forces; they are targeted for use in wartime 'in accordance with Alliance policy and strategic concepts under plans made by SACEUR, save where Britain's supreme national interests otherwise require'. This last phrase—the kernel of British 'independence'—means that British, not NATO, political authorities can have

ultimate say over the use of Polaris and other British nuclear forces: for example, in a situation where the US and other NATO allies somehow desist from a European war which the British feel compelled to fight alone.

The British Army deploys entirely US-made nuclear missiles and nuclear-capable artillery with the British Army on the Rhine. The RAF and Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy deploy many squadrons of bombers and strike aircraft capable of delivering nuclear bombs and depth charges. These include the Buccaneer, Jaguar, Nimrod and Tornado aircraft assigned to either SACEUR or SACLANT. The Royal Navy also flies a variety of helicopters equipped with nuclear depth bombs for attacking submarines. These are assigned to SACLANT, mainly for military missions in the East Atlantic.

The Influence of the Cabinet and Cabinet Office

Decisions on defence and foreign policy are usually assumed to be made by the Prime Minister and Cabinet. By the time weapons decisions have reached this point, however, the options are normally so limited that the decision is merely between alternative types or makes of similar weapons. Options such as non-nuclear alternatives, for example, would not normally be under consideration.

The Cabinet Office plays a crucial role in the formulation and consistency of defence and foreign policy: it is regarded by experienced observers as the engine room of British central government. It houses the Joint Intelligence Organisation, which provides an early warning system for foreign and defence policy-making, as well as the Secretariats for each of the Cabinet Standing Committees. By the time the papers on a defence decision reach the Overseas and Defence Secretariat, the proposals have worked their way through the various processes and committees described, to a point where the Secretary of State for Defence is in agreement with his own civil servants about the decision to be taken and is prepared to defend it in Cabinet. Considerable amounts of money will have been spent on a particular weapons system by this stage, and the briefs prepared by the Overseas and Defence Secretariat will strongly recommend one particular course of action.

This section started with the sentence 'Decisions on defence and foreign policy are usually assumed to be made by the Prime Minister

and Cabinet'. The Cabinet, however, by no means always decides on particular questions as a whole Cabinet. Decisions are often taken in sub-committees, which bind the full Cabinet through the concept of 'collective responsibility', although other ministers may be ignorant that such a committee even exists. These committees are the vital working parts of the engine room of Westminster government, but very little is known about them. In 1984 there were thought to be some twenty-five known as Standing Committees, and about 110 of the even more secret Ad Hoc Committees. However, no-one outside a central core of top ministers and officials actually knows how many there are. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, a Standing Committee, ultimately officially takes decisions on nuclear systems. However, the secret Ad Hoc Committee known as MISC 7 dealt with the replacement of the Polaris force with Trident, and MISC 91 with the choice of the ALARM anti-radar missile. These committees are all chaired by the Prime Minister.

Parliament knows nothing of these decisions until the government decides to tell it. Even the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence, or the Public Accounts Committee, has no powers to require government to announce or debate such a decision.

The Influence of the Treasury

The purpose of the Treasury is to 'assist the government to control public expenditure and to promote satisfactory funding of the UK economy'. Staff in the central Treasury number just over 1,400 of whom only 175 are in the senior grades.

The Defence Policy and Materiel Group, known as 'DM', is the main section in the Treasury which deals with defence projects and expenditure. It has about twenty-four staff in total, under the supervision of two Assistant Secretaries and one Under-Secretary, and has the huge responsibility of monitoring the defence budget (of £17 033 000 000 for 1984–5). At ministerial level, DM normally deals with the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, who is also a member of the Cabinet. The Chancellor is concerned on major issues, such as nuclear projects, which are discussed by ministers collectively in Cabinet or Cabinet sub-committee.

Very knowledgeable sources feel that DM is badly understaffed for the job it has to do, that it is 'out of its class' in dealing with the MoD,

and that its staff simply do not have the weapons expertise to argue the merits of a complex new technology with the MoD.

Each year, the MoD negotiates with the Treasury a total amount of expenditure for existing programmes; within this total it is up to the MoD to decide what it will spend on what. There is a separate procedure for major new projects: every project which will cost more than £12.5 million in development or £25 million in production must have Treasury approval. The Ministry does however have the (crucial) right to deflect money between programmes during the year.

The Influence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

Arms control in Britain is engulfed within the broader process of national security policy formulation: it is directly linked, through a process of 'clearance', with defence policy. But the link is one-way. While arms control policy must be 'cleared' with the MoD, defence policy need not be cleared for its arms control implications.

Arms control policy is the responsibility of the Foreign Office. It is what is known as the 'lead' department for this issue, which means that, formally, policy initiatives on arms control are generated within the FCO and that the Foreign Secretary or his junior minister responsible are answerable to Parliament. At the official level a Superintending Under-Secretary is responsible for the two main departments—the Arms Control and Disarmament Department (ACDD), and the Defence Department. The latter is described as being responsible for liaison with the MoD on international aspects of defence, although in practice both departments do so. The Defence Department is concerned with the bilateral talks between the USA and USSR. The longer-standing international forums for arms control negotiations, the UN Conference on Disarmament and other UN talks, are the responsibility of the ACDD.

An important 'triangle' for arms control policy exists between the Superintending Under-Secretary, the Director of the Defence Department and the Director of the ACDD. The quality of these three men and their working relationship is crucial to the direction and strength of arms control policy at the policy-making level.

The MoD itself has a new Defence Arms Control Unit which is directly responsible to the Permanent Under-Secretary—it is not a large unit, with a staff of approximately a dozen military and civilians. The

Unit will apparently not have representatives at arms control talks, and is reluctant to describe its relationship with the FCO. Its staff spend a part of their time in answering letters from the public.

It would be wrong to assign the present sorry state of arms control negotiations, and with it the low ebb that Britain's arms control machinery has reached, to this government in particular. This fall from grace is reflected in many small but important changes in the FCO's arms control staffing. The early exciting period when the Research Unit as a separate department brought experienced academics into the arms control machinery ended in 1972. The public information role has become paramount in the mid 1970s as the research work withered. ACDD itself has suffered cuts in staff. The UK Disarmament Delegation in Geneva had its Ambassador down-graded from first to third rank.

The Role of Parliament

Under British parliamentary tradition, Cabinet Ministers are accountable to the House of Commons in certain ways: answering parliamentary questions, replying to letters from MPs, taking part in debates. Many questions on nuclear issues, however, are simply not answered. There are long periods when there are no debates on nuclear weapons at all, for example between 1967 and 1980, a period during which plans were laid for massively increasing Britain's nuclear capability.

In theory the possibility is always open to the opposition to call for a debate on government policy. If the government majority is small, and if the opposition can win over government backbenchers, it can pass a vote of No Confidence. If that happened the government would normally be forced to resign. In practice this has not happened on nuclear issues, for two reasons. Firstly, because insufficient information has been made available to enable a fully-fledged debate on crucial decisions, and secondly because the Labour Party in opposition has until recently been deeply split on the issue. The Conservative Party has had a substantial majority, and in opposition would have been uninterested in calling a debate on nuclear weapons.

The Defence Estimates are made public in a White Paper, usually in January each year, and voted upon. The figures in the defence budget are set under many different headings, but nowhere do Members of Parliament see what US legislators see, namely the 'line items' which

describe the cost of each weapon separately, in its research, development, testing and manufacture stages. Only in that way would they be able to recognise and to control the development of new nuclear weapons.

Commons Select Committees One way in which the House of Commons tries to exercise control over government actions and to obtain information is through the Select Committees. The Defence Committee is one of fourteen Select Committees appointed in 1979 to shadow individual government departments. While it may call for evidence from and question ministers and civil servants, and recommend changes in policy and expenditure, the Committee does not have the power of appropriation of funds to give effect to these recommendations (as does the US Senate Armed Services Committee, for example)—this would require substantial constitutional change. Ministers retain the right to withhold information 'in the national interest', and the committee does not have access to papers containing the advice which civil servants give to ministers.

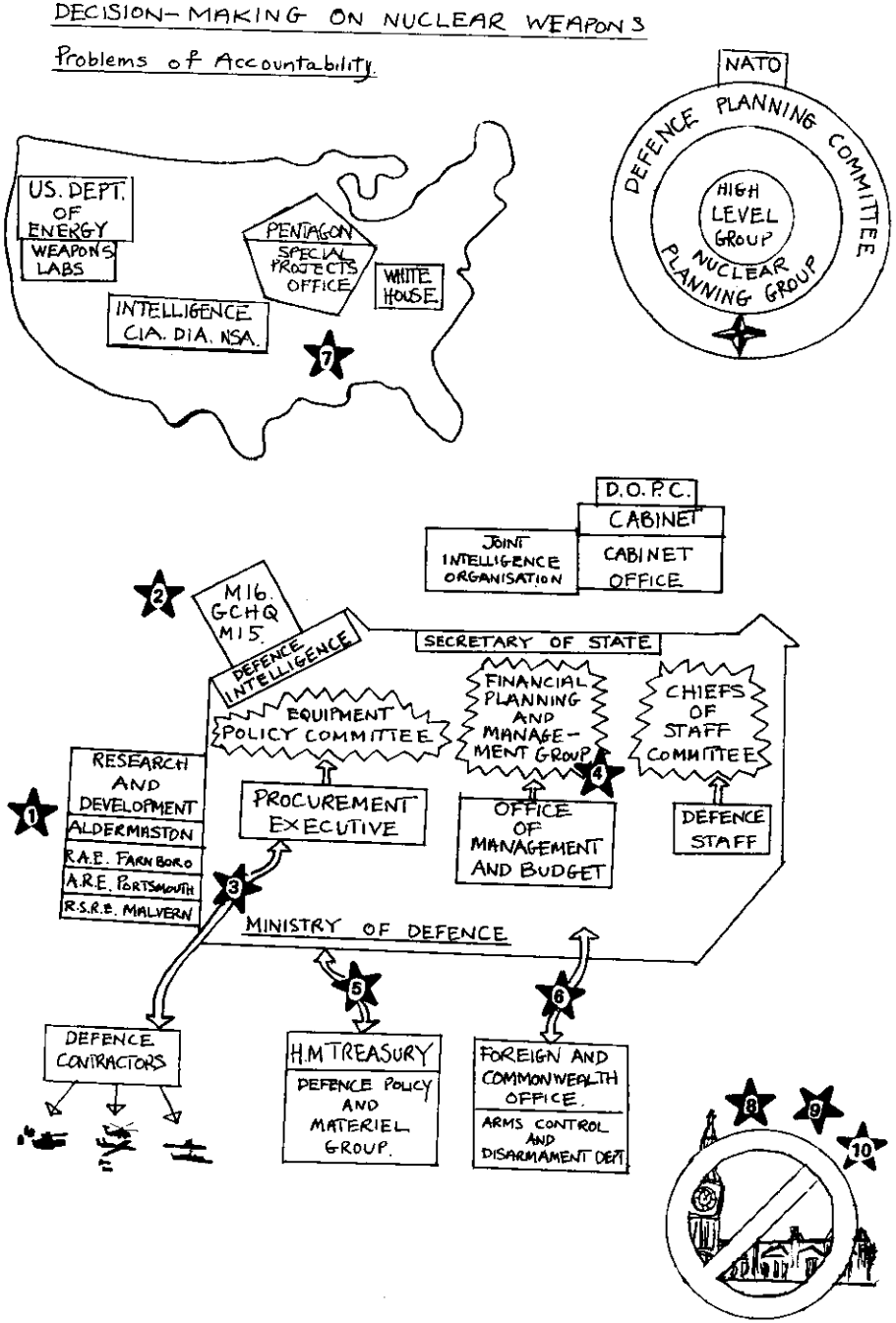
This committee represents the furthest limit to which inquiry can be made on defence issues by the representatives of the people of Britain. As with any interrogation or dialogue, the success of Select Committees depends on the ability of MPs to ask the right questions and the willingness of civil servants to answer them: neither of which can be absolutely relied upon. MPs often lack really powerful briefing, and fail to push an issue to its conclusion. Civil servants are determined not to get drawn into discussing policy questions or 'who gave what advice to whom' on any particular issue.

The Defence Committee regularly publishes reports of its inquiries, but it should be noted that a substantial proportion of its hearings are in camera and the reports are dotted with deletions of what is considered to be sensitive evidence.

The Public Accounts Committee This is the most powerful committee in the House of Commons, consisting of fifteen backbench MPs and chaired by a former cabinet minister from the opposition. It has been a public watchdog since 1862, keeping a check on the billions of pounds for which Permanent Secretaries (heads of departments) have to account. It is the only Select Committee to have a large specialist staff working directly for it: the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff of 600 are independent auditors who examine the accounts of

each government department to ensure that expenditure is in accordance with the law and Parliament's intentions.

The Comptroller, however, failed to inform the PAC of the escalating costs of the Chevaline project, although he had access to the relevant papers at the time. The Committee was reduced to publishing an indignant report after the event.



Decision-making and Accountability

As a result of looking carefully at the way in which nuclear weapons decisions are made in Britain, a number of disquieting points arise. These largely concern the issue of accountability. It appears that the influences on British nuclear weapons decisions often escape the usual checks and balances which under normal circumstances are expected to control decision-making on issues of national importance.

1. The research of scientists and designers is classified

Early in the life of a weapons system, there is a question of accountability in the work of scientists and designers. Their work on nuclear systems, indeed on most defence contracts, is classified. It cannot therefore be published, and can be discussed only amongst a very narrow coterie of specialist colleagues, all working for the MoD. Lord Zuckerman speaks of defence scientists 'exchanging ideas only in the closed community in which they work'.[1] This means that their work never receives the criticism of their peers, traditionally regarded as a vital element in scientific endeavour. For the past five years, for example, there has been a total embargo on the publication of all work on high powered lasers by Britain, France, West Germany, the United States and of course by the Soviet Union.

Professor Henry Durand, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Science and the Environment, is aware of the dilemma: 'We encourage our young scientists to publish papers on the one hand', he told *The Times*[2] 'and we have to restrain them with the other'. This situation, unique to defence science and to nuclear weapons design in particular, allows for none of the scientific community's traditional critical system which weeds out 'bad' science. It also prevents proper discussion of the morality or otherwise of this kind of science.

2. Threat assessments, based on intelligence data, cannot be checked

As we have seen, the defence intelligence services of the nuclear nations prepare annual assessments of enemy capabilities. These

threat assessments are used as the basis for planning future weapons requirements. In a number of cases, the assessments have subsequently proved to be wrong. For example, 'In the early 1960s the Russians were said to be able to field 175 divisions in Europe against twenty-five NATO divisions. This seven to one superiority was used to frighten European NATO members into raising their force contributions, and also to justify a new strategic plan based on threatened first use of tactical nuclear weapons. The figure was later subjected to high-level analysis with the Pentagon. It was then found that, if it cost the United States $2.2 billion annually to equip sixteen divisions and six priority reserve divisions, a force of 175 divisions would have cost the Russians $17.5 billion—a figure that the analysts found incredible within the limitations of the Soviet economy. They also found an incompatibility between a US army of 960 000 being able to form only sixteen peace-time divisions and a Soviet army of two million being allegedly able to form 175.'[3]

More recently, the CIA has revised its assessment of the Soviet SS-19 missile, and say they now believe it is too inaccurate to pose a threat to US missile silos.[4] Its accuracy as estimated in 1977 proved an important factor in the campaign to build the US counterpart, the ten-warheaded MX missile.

In 1981 Britain decided to spend £218 000 000 on 100 new Spearfish torpedoes, largely on the basis of the threat of dozens of new Soviet Alpha sub-marines by the end of the century. But the Soviet submarine programme has failed and been terminated, according to evidence released in Washington in June 1985.[5]

Such is the frequency of disagreement between different intelligence-gathering agencies, or of intelligence reports later being found to have been inaccurate or exaggerated,[6] that many present and former government officials in the US see them as too fragile and uncertain to be used as the basis for major decisions.

3. Defence procurement contracts permit runaway expenditure

Sixty per cent of MoD contracts are currently conducted on a 'cost-plus' basis.[7] 'Cost-plus' means that the contractor charges the MoD, and ultimately the taxpayer, what the weapons costs to make, plus an agreed profit. (The alternative is a 'fixed price' contract—the MoD put out a tender, and then accept a fully specified contract at a fixed price.)

The problem with 'cost-plus' is that it allows constant redesigning, sometimes called 'gold-plating', of a weapon, and means in practice that both deadlines and expenditure stretch out. A current example of this, causing extreme embarrassment to the Ministry, is the Nimrod Airborne Early Warning project. It was finally discovered by the Commons Select Committee on Defence in February 1985 that it will cost in excess of one billion pounds—a staggering fifty-one per cent more than was estimated—and will be as much as six years late. Another example was the Chevaline improvement to the Polaris warhead, a project which was under development for thirteen years at a cost of over one billion pounds before Parliament was informed of it. The 250 development contracts for Chevaline were 'mostly cost-plus'.[8] The Cabinet Office has recently criticised the MoD for paying too much for all its supplies. The new Chief of Defence Procurement is reportedly trying to reduce 'cost-plus' contracting. The problem is nevertheless compounded by the secrecy surrounding deals between the MoD and its main contractors, on which even the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons gets very little information.

4. No mechanism exists for control or evaluation of permanent officials

The departments of the Ministry of Defence which deal with nuclear questions are staffed by hard-working and competent civil servants, who are permanent. They report to four junior ministers and one secretary of state, who change on average every two and a half years. As Harold Macmillan warned twenty years ago, cabinet ministers are rarely equipped with the technical expertise to make an adequate assessment of the validity of a new weapons system. 'In all these affairs prime ministers, ministers of defence and cabinets are under a great handicap. The technicalities and uncertainties of the sophisticated weapons which they have to authorise are out of the range of normal experience. There is today a far greater gap between their own knowledge and the expert advice which they receive than there has ever been in the history of war.'[9]

The technology to which he was referring has grown yet more complex in twenty years; and with the sheer pressure of work involved, ministers tend to be more concerned with the *presentation* of policy and the deflection of criticism, than with actually *making* the deci-

sions. They tend to *acquiesce* in these decisions—to accept the predigested options which are presented to them by experts who may have been working on a particular system for a decade or more. Lord Zuckerman, who himself advised ministers for more than a decade, has this to say: 'I have recently come to the view that the dense veil of secrecy that shrouds British nuclear affairs—and other technical affairs too—and which, for all we know, may be penetrable by our potential enemies and competitors, can be prejudicial to our national interest. Obviously we do not want to risk revealing technical secrets to any potential enemy. But discussion of highly important technical matters with strategic and economic overtones within a small circle that not only has a vested interest in the subject, but which is also shielded politically from informed and critical debate, does not necessarily result in advice that leads to the wisest political decisions.'[10]

While cabinet ministers are accountable to Parliament for decisions they take (or at least those of which Parliament is aware), no mechanism currently exists for the accountability of those who shape these decisions.

5. Treasury oversight of defence expenditure

The Treasury has a department consisting of twenty-four people, of whom only three are in senior grades, to monitor defence expenditure of over eighteen billion pounds. The MoD is in theory obliged to clear with the Treasury all new projects due to cost more than £12.5 million in development and more than £25 million on production. However, at this sort of staffing level the Treasury is in no position to have the technological expertise to argue the merits of weapons systems with MoD teams. Furthermore, the MoD can ultimately evade Treasury control of defence expenditure by demanding a special account on a particular issue, as it did in the case of the Falklands war, and as it could do in the case of Trident.

6. The Foreign Office, weapons decisions and arms control

The Foreign Office is obliged to 'clear' arms control policy changes with the MoD; however the MoD is *not* obliged to clear any new weapons initiative with the Foreign Office for possible arms control

implications. This means that the Foreign Office could be unaware of the start of a new weapon which would contravene an existing arms control agreement, or wreck current or planned negotiations. Over the past thirty years the Foreign Office Arms Control Department has had its budget and research staffing cut. Expenditure on arms control research is not disclosed by the FCO, where £2304 million is spent each year on military R & D. The influence of the MoD has increased at the expense of the Foreign Office; many experienced observers feel that defence policy now dictates foreign policy.

7. Agreements with the US shrouded in secrecy

Since 1942 when British scientists went to Los Alamos to work on the atomic bomb, the nature of our relationship with the US over nuclear weapons has never been made clear to the British public. Secret agreements have been made,[11] incoming governments have reversed their electoral platforms[12] and new weapons have been developed in utmost secrecy[13] as a result of US pressures. These pressures are never discussed, we do not know what they are, and it is never clear what is involved in our nuclear dealings with the US. Over 28 000 troops, for example, are stationed at over one hundred bases in Britain, some of them host to US nuclear weapons. This apparently falls under the Programme of Co-operation which the US normally signs with those countries where its nuclear weapons are stationed, but details of such a Programme have not been made available to the British public.

Another example concerns recent US plans to deploy in Europe new nuclear artillery shells of the neutron bomb type. British defence ministers denied in late 1984 and early 1985 that any such proposals for 'modernisation' have ever been made, let alone accepted.[14] However, seven months earlier, Dr Richard Wagner, Assistant to Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger, told a Congressional committee that as long ago as October 1983 the new 155 mm and 8 inch nuclear artillery shells had been endorsed by NATO ministers.[15] He was asked in April 1985 by a Congressional committee, 'Is their [i.e. the British and German ministers'] desire not to be explicit *for home consumption*?' He replied, 'Probably'. He was asked 'So we are left with some vague generalities which we interpret one way, and the local folks in Britain and Germany are to interpret another way. Isn't that really the political reality we are dealing with?'[16]

8. Decisions taken in NATO not debated in Parliament

The above was an example of an agreement with the US by NATO ministers including our own Secretary of State for Defence, and not revealed to the British parliament, even in response to direct parliamentary questions.

Another recent example of a NATO decision taken over the head of Parliament, with no debate, took place during the autumn of 1984. MPs called repeatedly on the Secretary of State for Defence to debate the Follow-On-Force-Attack concept before a decision was taken in the NATO Defence Planning Committee; they asked for the view of the NATO military committee on the subject, they asked what our Chief of Staff and Ambassador to NATO said about it.[17] All requests were denied, until on 11 November Denzil Davies asked the Secretary to confirm that the concept was *not* part of NATO strategy, when he was informed that over a month previously the Follow-On-Force-Attack had been adopted by NATO. There was no debate, no discussion, not even any information.

9. The impotence of Parliament over nuclear weapons

Parliament can be denied any information whatsoever on nuclear decisions, even for many years after those decisions have been taken. This is possible because Parliament has no power in terms of controlling funding for specific weapons programmes. In the pages of the annual Defence Estimates MPs cannot discover what money is being voted for what stage of production of a weapons system. Even Defence Select Committees and the Public Accounts Committee have no powers to monitor, let alone control, this expenditure. In the case of the Chevaline programme, the Public Accounts Committee reported, 'our criticism is that the costs were not disclosed, and that there was no requirement that they should be disclosed . . . provision should be made to supply this Committee and the Defence Committee from an early stage with broad information on the nature, costs and progress of such a programme'.[18]

10. Cabinet decisions secret even from the whole Cabinet

A British government can number as many as ninety or a hundre ministers. Key decisions however, are taken in sub-committees, som of which are known, but the vast majority of which are secret. Dec sions taken in sub-committees bind the whole Cabinet through th concept of 'collective responsibility', although other ministers may b ignorant that such a committee even exists.

Decisions taken in these committees can be kept secret from the re of the Cabinet, and certainly from Parliament, for years. In the case the Chevaline warhead for Polaris, the project was under developme for seven years before the full Cabinet was told, and for thirteen year through four changes of government, before Parliament was told. B this time the new weapon was almost complete, having cost the ta payer well over one billion pounds.

What emerges from this brief discussion is that the mechanisms f accountability in Britain which have evolved gradually over centuri were not designed for anything remotely like nuclear weapons. Th people who are answerable for the decisions do not shape tho decisions and do not control them; those who shape the decisions a not answerable; the public is not permitted sufficient information t enable even its elected representatives to ask informed questions.

The next step is to ascertain which are the key decisions in the life a nuclear weapons system. The decision to deploy is clearly not the k decision—deployment happens regardless of public protest an because a weapon has been in preparation for fifteen years or more. the decision to start R & D on a new weapon is the key decision, the the present systems of accountability *cannot* work, for all the reaso described.

This, and suggestions for a system of accountability which coul work, will be the subject of a further paper from the Oxford Researc Group.

Notes

1. Lord Zuckerman, 'Scientists, Bureaucrats and Ministers', *Proceedings of t Royal Institution*, vol. 56.
2. *The Times* (8 August 1984).

3. A. Wilson, *The Disarmers Handbook* (London: Penguin, 1983).
4. CIA, *1985 National Intelligence Estimate*, as reported by M. R. Gordon in *National Journal* (July 1985).
5. Evidence given by Admiral Kinnaird McKee, Deputy Assistant Navy Secretary, to House Appropriations Committee, as published in *Navy News and Undersea Technology.*
6. See: Prados, 'Soviet Estimates'; L. Freedman, *US Intelligence and Soviet Military Capability*; R. T. Scott, 'Now a Warhead Gap' in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (November 1984).
7. *The Times* (16 April 1985).
8. Sir Frank Cooper in House of Commons Ninth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, *Chevaline Improvement to the Polaris Missile System* (HMSO, March 1982), HC 269, p. 15.
9. H. Macmillan, *Pointing the Way* (Wm Collins, 1972).
10. Lord Zuckerman, ibid.
11. See M. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, vol. 1 (Macmillan, 1974).
12. The first Wilson government, for instance, decided to maintain the British nuclear deterrent after the Labour leadership had previously campaigned against it, in order to secure financial help from the US—Lord Wilson on Radio 3, 'The Quality of Cabinet Government', 27.6.85.
13. One of Aldermaston's reasons for developing the Chevaline warhead for Polaris, built in secret for thirteen years, was in order to have a new technological breakthrough to impress their US colleagues.
14. Parliamentary questions 24.10.84; 29.10.84; 28.1.85; 26.2.85.
15. Congressional testimony 1.5.84.
16. Congressional testimony 11.4.85.
17. Parliamentary questions 29.10.84 (Hansard col 856); 13.11.84 (Hansard col 525/6); 13.11.84 (Hansard col 529).
18. HC269, *op. cit.*

The Oxford Research Group is an independent research group, funded by major British Charitable Trusts, whose aims are:

- to carry out research on decision-making in the public domain, placing special emphasis on the decision-making process whereby nuclear weapons are designed, manufactured, procured and deployed in all the nuclear and emerging nuclear nations.
- to supply information yielded by that research, at its discretion, to individuals, groups or organisations.

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